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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates the adaptability of a poet's words to a variety of themes and techniques, and primarily illustrates how the poetic treasures of the African world can be used to create awareness that words are biracial, cross-cultural, and transsexual. The key thesis of the paper is that once an African poet has published a work, the words then become the interpretive property of each reading individual. The main activity outlined and encouraged involves the adaptation of poetry into a dramatic production. Included in the paper are the following: (1) a reasoned defense of the viability of the theoretical basis for the activity; (2) a play, called a "She--He Dialogue," which involves three characters (Narrator, She, He) and is comprised of excerpts from African poetry by various authors; and (3) 34 citations locating the sources of the poetry quotations. Twelve footnotes and 13 references are attached. (HB)

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AN AMERICAN PLAY ON AFRICAN WORDS

A SHE --- HE DIALOGUE

by

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In undertaking this article, I set myself to the limited task of demonstrating the adaptability of a poet's words to a variety of themes and technique with the primary purpose of illustrating how the poetic treasures of the African world can be used to create awareness through secondary and adult instruction, that words are bi-racial, cross-cultural, and trans-sexual, that the African word is utilitarian and translatable.

Using the words of poetic artists of contemporary Africa, an attempt to use the poetic dimension to mirror the contemporary issue of female/male relationship will follow, based upon this writer's thesis that once a poet has published a work, the words then become the interpretative property of each reading individual, to find comfort, collaboration, to say: "this poet can put into words what I want to express, better than I".

My thesis is supported by E. Mphahlele:

> Once a man has produced a poem, he no longer has control over it: it becomes public property and is available for new interpretations at every stage of our consciousness, whether within the writer's own generation or later on, because with the passage of time we know more, experience more, and develop new interests and new techniques of coping with life's problems.[1]

African poetry is adaptable, utilitarian, and translatable because it has been written not only for readers, but also for listeners, formulated through oral literary communication.

This concept is so aptly stated by the Ghanaian author, Ama Atta Aidoo:

> ...if I have a good short story by somebody, I would want to either have the person reading it to an audience or telling it to an audience. We cannot tell our stories maybe with the same expertise as our forefathers. But to me, all the art of the speaking voice could be brought back so easily ...Now I could either have the person himself telling or reading it to an audience.[2]

Ms. Aidoo's closeness to the oral-tradition composition, supports my technique of adapting literature and poetry to the dramatic production.

Rewriting African literature and poetry in the play format offers immediate returns to the artist, whether actor or writer:

> ...it seems clear that in an art form supported largely by the challenge of ready delivery and the encouragement of ready rewards, the artist ... works to the advantage of the tradition...[3]

One aspect in the writing of this play has been the possibility of adapting the poetic phenomena to the play, incorporating the dialect of the African writer, registering characteristics applicable to any adult audience; in other words, my play works randomly chosen poetic verse into a standard play organization (as, John Spencer and Michael Gregory have stated):

> Any piece of language is therefore part of a situation, and so has a context, a relationship with that situation.[4]

The advantage of the style used in this project is that it expands the African writer's discourse, offering additional dimensions. For example, this play's subject was an adult one, of an inter-racial-cultural marriage; but, the procedure can include any subject, for any audience. Specifically, we can address a secondary class in world history, concerned with Western colonialization of Africa:

ENGLISHMAN: When infant dies of broken tummy, ain't kiddies dying bloody funny?[5]

AFRICAN: I hear the guns. They are killing the children of Soweto. Even now as the summer winter ends and the first heat of Africa steadies itself for a journey, the children of Africa die.[6]

ENGLISHMAN: Home to where the bugle calls, home to the drums, home to the hurrahs of defeat.[7]

AFRICAN: Life, not death; hope, not despair; dawn, not dusk; new, not old; struggle, not submission.[8]

The audience, in this case, the semi-social-conscious U.S. and African secondary student, can create their own play, using clusters of poems to educate themselves, to experience history and contemporary life in a fresh, vivid manner.

An increased effort by instructors to include the recitation of contemporary African artists would provide a wide audience, including those students with literacy limitations.

I have been concerned with studying a standard mode of narration, the complete poem, and then, locating verses which are correlative to play narratives or, perhaps,:

> ...the notion of the aesthetic play: the play of the tradition, the play on the tradition, the sheer play of indeterminacy itself.[9]

The method I've used, is simple: to point out that "poetry is made of words"[10]:

> A poem, like a piece of music, offers merely a text, which, strictly speaking, is only a kind of recipe; the cook who follows it plays an essential part. To speak of a poem in itself, has no real or precise meaning. It is to speak of a potentiality. The poem is an abstraction, a piece of writing that stands waiting, a law that lives only in some human mouth, and that mouth is simply a mouth...[11]

that, people should not regard poetry as one dimensional in purpose and meaning, but rather as a collection of symbols,

metaphors, and word groupings waiting to be discovered, to speak for anyone, anywhere:

> The poet speaks to us of one thing, but in this one thing there seems to lurk the secret of all. He said what he meant, but his meaning seems to beckon away beyond itself, or rather to expand into something boundless which is only focused in it; something also which, we feel, would satisfy not only the imagination, but the whole of us; that something within us...[12]

CHARACTERS

Narrator

She

He

ONE ACT

SCENE ONE: The Beginning of the Relationship. SETTING: Double bed, actors are nude.

NARRATOR: In the beginning the woman and the man were narcisstic, following illusions of egoistic perceptions of each other.

SHE: (Caressing his skin with her fingertips, kissing his face as she speaks) You were the first to open my eyes to the wonders of the earth.[1]

HE: (Thinking aloud) Last time I made love arrangements, they materialised and no doubt, I was flattered, if not flabbergasted![2] (And while stroking her hair) Only your eyes have pierced the stoic defences of the undeceived, and your arm's soft concern transcends whatever else I have achieved.)[3]

SHE: (Wrapping her legs around him) If two lie together, then they have heat. (Coy, teasing) How can one be warm alone?[4]

HE: I have fed out of the drum. I have drunk out of the cymbal. I have entered your bridal chamber; and lo, I am the sole witness to my homecoming.[5]

SHE: I will lie with you, lounging in long grass, on a long, mellow afternoon and twine my fingers in yours; groping in long moist grass; and then, as the impulse moves, lock arms, front breasts, touch lips or lazily tongue, exploring your mouth and tongue.[6]

HE: Ecstasy and passion have giant wings -- fly eternally through tinsel world of things.[7]

SHE: And know the tenderness of these my reaching hands can conjure moisture, gentleness and honey sweetness from your yearning hollows.[8]

HE: Anguished passion knots your brows, sharpens your temple's curve with shadows, flickers your tongue beyond your lips -- your nipples fumble for my fingertips.[9]

SHE: (They embrace) Then I will love, yes love; extravagantly under the flutter of dying leaves and in a shadow of mist in wonder; for autumn is wonder and wonder is hope.[10]

HE: Through your blue and lucent unending expanses of air, I pulse with phallic thrust devouring your contoured loveliness: the grey and silver wings of my affection over-arch to your horizons.[11]

(He rolls on top of her, lights dim)

NARRATOR: And they were lost in the mist of their singular soul. His movement was gentle, slow, deliberate. Hers was quick. She was crying. Soft low moans. He realized that a thin line of water was running down the side of his left eye. He was crying too. Their dreams asleep and awake were one. This was the hour of their redemption washed clean by tears brewed from the anguish of the singular soul.[12]

(Lights dark/out)

SCENE TWO: The Middle of the Relationship. SETTING: Double bed, he in briefs, she in nightie. Actors vary position in bed.

NARRATOR: The springs of the flesh flow slack and limp and tame and slow -- what then? what then? When the surcease of sex is gone, the release of the physical breaker crash -- what then? what then?[13]

HE: The stars have departed and I -- where am I?[14]

SHE: Each sigh is time's stillness in the abyss.[15]

HE: We've spoken. You ignored the syllables. Between the sentences amass the silences.[16]

SHE: I love you I said to the ceiling, though limbs forget so soon.[17]

NARRATOR: She could not fall asleep immediately. She wasn't thinking of anything in particular. But she was thinking of him. She was always thinking of him.[18]

HE: I was to become an alien situated between the scorn and hatred of both the white and the black world; the white world wanted to fasten a noose around my neck for soiling that purity which is white, the blacks were distrustful, eager to spit on me for thinking and loving white, which is the symbol of their oppression. The whites could not see me as a man, and the blacks could not see her as a women.[19]

SHE: Cultural differences do not necessarily mean defeat.[20]

HE: Do not be surprised my love if my melody grows somber. If I abandon the sweet-voiced reed for

the khalam and the tama.[21]

SHE: It matters little that this land, this door is separate. In the rare air we have met.[22]

HE: My seeds have fallen in absences. Sunlight dried them like spittle on asphalt.[23]

SHE: Aren't you the sweetest and loveliest thing in Africa and America rolled together? My darling, we are going to create a paradise, with or without children.[24]

HE: Darling some men do mind alot.[25] Poeple will be too pleased to pick at me, as birds at worms squirming in the mud. What, shall I show myself a pond drained dry of water so their laughter will crack up the floor of my being?[26]

SHE: Where have men gone who fought colour theories, cracked spectrums -- back to prisms?[27]

HE: Marriage is like Oware. Someone is bound to lose and another gain.[28]

(Lights dim, actors turn back to back)

NARRATOR: She tried tears, tried prayers and like some bird already stuck, but still struggling for sunlight, skipped from one twig to another, but leaves and boughs shrunk in her path and none could offer her closet.[29]

(Lights dark/out)

SCENE THREE: The Ending of the Relationship. SETTING: Single beds, actors are clothed.

NARRATOR: He wishes to return to his African past -- a past

already undergoing dramatic changes, a past that may have already become mythical.[30]

SHE: The moon has now gone under the sea. The song has now gone under the shade.[31]

HE: You talk to me of pain here, there, everywhere insomnia, riots in the brain, unbearable domestic fights. I listen. My heart a graveyard where church bells toll at midnight. You describe the ache of despair, your stomach in revolt. I carve your intestines out, amazed how much you have to spare. Between us the compassion of sharp steel.[32]

SHE: Separation seems all. I remember your face so ringed with shadow, it hurt my every awareness. Perplexed, I wipe the window. Rain drones on and the bird sleeps wordless. The thrush continues and the tree. Only that inward poignance craves nearness and meaning, totally lonely. At no moment have I believed that long song's dead though. And I have often breathed the sweet air, after rain, reminiscent of you.[33]

NARRATOR: Does the heart survive the death of love, the slow receding of the flush of tenderness leaving wet sand and debris, dessicated shards of molluscs, the stink of decaying weed and fish, the slow atrophy of the fibrils of tenderness leaving a numbness and scarred dead-white tissue, a keratinous scaling and gangerous rot. Vision grows luck-lustre

glaucous, cloud-lour darkens the sun, cloud, skies,
colours are leached to nondescript shades; pulse
thickens and rigor freezes the limbs: love being
dead, or dying, can the heart survive?[34]

(Lights dim to out)

POETRY QUOTATIONS

[1]C. Laye. L'enfant noir, 1955. (From: W. Cartney. Whispers from a continent. New York: Random House, 1969. p. 5).

[2]A. Nortje. Dead roots. (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1971). p. 11.

[3]Nortje. p. 15.

[4]A. La Guma. And a threefold cord, 1964. (From: Whispers, p. 117).

[5]C. Okigbo. Labyrinths. (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), p. 60.

[6]D. Brutus. A simple lust. (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1963), p. 148.

[7]L. Peters. Selected poetry. (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1967) p. 4.

[8]Brutus. p. 36.

[9]Brutus. p. 26-27.

[10]Peters. p. 6.

[11]Brutus. p. 26-27.

[12]K. Awoonor. This earth, my brother... (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972) p. 57.

[13]Brutus. p. 38.

[14]Okigbo. p. 13.

[15]Okigbo. p. 58.

[16]Nortje. p. 4.

[17]Nortje. p. 19.

[18]Awoonor. p. 82.

[19]B. Modisane. Blame me on history, 1963. (From: Whispers, p. 5).

[20]A. Aidoo. The dilemma of a ghost. (New York: Collier Books, 1965) p. 24-25.

[21]L. Senghor. Poems, 1964. (From: Whispers, p. 312).

[22]Nortje. p. 25.

[23]Nortje. p. 62.

[24]Aidoo. p. 37.

[25]Aidoo. p. 37.

[26]J. Clark. "Song of a Goat", Three plays, 1964. (From: Whispers, p. 344).

[27]Nortje. p. 4.

[28]Aidoo. p. 89.

[29]Clark. "The Masquerade", Three plays, 1964. (From: Whispers, p. 354).

[30]W. Cartney. Whispers from a continent. (New York: Random House, 1969) p. 4.

[31]C. Okigbo. Heavensgate, 1962. (From: Whispers, p. 388).

[32]Peters. p. 71.

[33]Nortje. p. 18.

[34]Brutus. p. 169.

FOOTNOTES

[1]E. Mphahlele. Voices in the whirlwind and other essays. (New York, 1967) p. 118.

[2]C. Pieterse and D. Duerden. African writers talking. (New York, 1972) p. 24.

[3]I. Okpewho. The epic in Africa. (New York, 1979) p. 26.

[4]D.C. Freeman. Linguistics and literary style. (New York, 1970) p. 75.

[5]B. Feinberg. Poets to the people. (Ibadan, 1980) p. 57.

[6]K. Awoonor. The house by the sea. (Greenfield Center, N.Y., 1978) p. 11.

[7]Awoonor. p. 64.

[8]Feinberg. p. 58.

[9]H. Gates, Jr. "The blackness of blackness': a critique of the sign and signifying monkey". (From: Critical Inquiry, June 1983, 9, (4) p. 709.

[10]F. Leavis. New bearings in English poetry. (London, 1954) p. 2.

[11]B. Smith. Poetic closure. (Chicago, 1968) p. 9.

[12]H. Adams. Critical theory since Plato. (New York, 1971) p. 747.

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